

Volunteerism in Nepal

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Abstract

The author addresses historical and contemporary aspects of volunteerism in Nepal as a fundamental building block of civil society.

Keywords:

volunteerism, civil society, Nepal, Hinduism, Buddhism

Volunteering is a fundamental building block of the civil society. It brings to life the noblest aspirations of humankind. The pursuit of peace, freedom, opportunity, safety and justice for all people, volunteering is an essential element of all societies.

As the government alone cannot meet the multiple needs of people, the only alternative is to let people be active individually or through organizations to cater to their own needs to the largest extent possible. So is the case with Nepal, too.

Volunteerism has a long history in Nepal. The two major religions, Hinduism and Buddhism which are practiced in Nepal teach that any voluntary work that brings relief and solace to the people in distress leads one to salvation or *moksha*. To sacrifice a part of what one owns for the benefit of others is considered a virtue. Such voluntary philanthropic acts are believed to ensure better life in the future births as it is believed in Nepal. Since the time immemorial, the people in Nepal have been deeply motivated to render voluntary services for the benefit of the poor, sick, destitute, downtrodden and neglected members of the society. The manifestations of such voluntary works, for instance, are public wells (*kuwa*), stone taps (*dhunge*

dhara), resting places (*chautaras*) and guest houses (*pati-pauwas*). Such works in many cases are carried out by individuals who are committed to alleviation of the suffering and hardship of the people.

What matters the most is that volunteerism was institutionalized even in those days in Nepal though its nature, purpose and functioning are somewhat different to what is practiced in today's world. Voluntary works that were institutionalized in the good old days of Nepal, to name only a few, are the dispensaries (*aushadhalya*), orphanages (*anathalaya*), public schools (*pathshala*) and trusts (*guthi*). Such institutions were set up and managed by the groups of people. Though they were autonomous in nature, the people responsible for management were accountable to the communities. Many such voluntary organizations still exist and are very useful platforms to perform a number of social, cultural functions in the community.

The voluntary organizations initiated and managed by the communities continued even during the Rana period when the rulers were extremely autocratic. However, a staunch supporter of Mahatma Gandhi in India started a voluntary organization in 1926 to train people to make hand-spun

thread and hand-woven cotton clothes. This was followed by the establishment of another voluntary organization called *Paropakar Auhsadhalya* (Charitable Medical Trust) in 1947. These two associations were the pioneer voluntary organizations run with people's voluntary participation in its true sense. After the dawn of democracy in Nepal in 1951, the government was liberal to voluntary organizations which resulted in phenomenal growth of such organizations. As the years passed by, the government felt the need for establishing a strong mechanism to coordinate, regulate, and strengthen their activities. Hence, the Social Service National Coordination Act 1977 was introduced and the Social Welfare Council, a body constituted by the government, was given the responsibility of coordinating the activities of all voluntary organizations in Nepal.

Youth and Volunteerism

Youth are the vital force of a nation and account for half of the world's population. Youth are the biggest factor in deciding the future of society and have significant roles to play in the process of nation building. Present day youth are facing and suffering from various social, economical, and cultural conflicts across the world. Youth sometime get involved in the violent expressions of unrest that characterize economic, social, and political problems.

Youth empowerment is an important issue to alleviate the feelings of frustration that lead them to get involved in such activities. They feel pressure from different domains of life. Thus, coping with such a confusing surrounding is a greater challenge for youth at the moment. Peace depends upon our own values, attitudes, and understanding. Understanding of peace must be planted, learned and, above all, exhibited through practice in every individual's daily

life. Youth must act to transform conflict and misunderstanding into cooperation and understanding to establish and foster peace. Young people have greater potentiality for solving their own problems, but they need support in developing the skills, knowledge and attitude that can enable them to exhibit their potential as active members of civil society.

Volunteerism: A "means to an end" to youth

Volunteerism is the best way to learn, understand, and practice ethical values and develop positive behaviors and attitudes, which help to transform society as whole. There are many learning opportunities around the globe where one may offer something within his/her capacity and gain new experiences, enhance life skills, and explore possible fields of employment according to their interests.

Why Do People Volunteer?

It is pertinent here to deal with a question of how people in Nepal look at volunteerism. Without going into the in-depth study, some reasons why people volunteer that I have observed in my work include:

- Feel they have something to offer;
- Influenced by others who have done voluntary work;
- To meet their own needs;
- They have time, resources and energy;
- It would be good for learning;
- It gives higher status in the society;
- To get experience for a possible field of employment;
- A gate to new comers for getting involved in the life's business;
- An alternative to something which is less pleasant;
- A means to an end;
- To alleviate guilt;

- Sense of gratitude to give back what they have taken/received;
- A sense of responsibility and duty;
- A particular commitment to specific subject and issue;
- An alternative interest;
- Relieve loneliness;
- Aware of the need and task to be done and no one else to do it;
- Desire to help; and
- Desire to influence some form of change (e.g., social, conservation, economic, etc.)

Benefits of Volunteer Work

Possible benefits to an individual volunteer that I have observed include:

- Make new friends and mix with different culture;
 - Gain experience of working in different environment;
 - Feel part of a workforce and community;
 - Improve self-confidence, develop communication skills, and network and make new contacts;
 - Learning the values of unpaid work;
 - Enhance life skills and experiences;
- and
- Learn different cultural values and practices.

Principles of Volunteerism

Volunteers are not “free”

Volunteer involvement generates administrative and project costs. Volunteers need to be recruited, placed, trained, and supervised. A volunteer, like a paid staff member, needs logistical support, supplies, information, staff assistance, and other job necessities.

Volunteers contribute more than initially meets the eye

Volunteers embody an organization's capacity to deliver services, share talents and expertise, and open new doors to particular segment of community. Volunteers are innovators and risk takers and bring an element of passion and enthusiasm to an organization.

"Volunteer" does not mean "amateur"

A volunteer who receives training in an unfamiliar task and can perform that task competently is as valued as a professional paid employee.

Volunteers and the organizations they serve must meet each other's expectations

Volunteers benefit from their experiences. Volunteer performance management systems should parallel the system for paid employees; this helps to ensure across-the-board quality control in leadership and service delivery.

Strengthening Volunteerism in Nepal

In order for volunteering to have the greatest impact and to be as inclusive as possible, it must be well planned, adequately resourced and effectively managed. This is the responsibility of leaders of volunteers. They are most effective when their work is recognized and supported. Therefore, we call on:

- Non-governmental-organizations (NGOs) to make volunteerism integral to achieving their mission and elevate the role of volunteer leaders within the organization.
- Government at all levels to invest in sustainable development of high quality volunteer and volunteer leadership and to model excellence in the management of volunteers.
- Businesses in the private sector to understand the importance of volunteerism and volunteer resource management and to assist volunteer organizations in developing this capacity.

- Donors and the philanthropic sector to support the commitment of resources to build the capacity of volunteer and management.

Volunteerism and Humanism

What does volunteerism have to do with humanism? Everything! The individuals that Humanists look up to the most throughout history all have several attributes in common. Amongst the compassion and the ability to use reason to solve problems, they also had the courage to take responsibility to create change in the world around them. They did so, often in adverse environments. In fact, the more adverse the situation, the more we look up to an individual who persevered to stand up for the ideals we hold so dear.

To me, the great Humanists are not great just because of their ability to express themselves with words, but also because they put their philosophy into action and do something positive to help create the change they envisioned in the world.

Volunteering is a great way to create change, and volunteers want to have an impact on the future. There are as many volunteering opportunities as there are problems that need to be solved. Volunteerism may take many forms; anytime you take it upon yourself to take action to create change, you are volunteering.

For Humanists, volunteering is a way to put philosophy into action. I had a friend in college who told me that all he really wanted out of life was to have a

positive impact on just one person. He wanted to live his life in such a way that it created an example for others to follow that did not require him to preach about his beliefs and values. He wanted his beliefs and values to be evident from his actions. He felt that if just one person learned by his example, he would have succeeded. He was, of course, a model by himself after a friend from whom he had learned. It is a good way to live. And, it is my belief that by volunteering in the community, I expand the number of people for whom I am likely to set a good example. By volunteering, we expand ourselves as individuals and show through example what it means to be a Humanist.

Is Volunteering Easy?

No - it takes time, energy and commitment, all of which are in short supply. In addition, volunteers do not always succeed at the tasks they set out for themselves and so must often deal with failure. This is why volunteers are considered such exceptional people; they persevere past the disappointments and keep going towards the better world they can see is possible. The current environment is adverse to say the least. However, as the saying goes, all it takes for evil to flourish is for good people to do nothing. And, since we know that we as Humanists are good people, we will do something: volunteer. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, *Life's most urgent question is: Are we doing for others?*

About the Author

Bishnu Hari Bhatta is Director of Volunteer Programs for the Partnership for Sustainable Development (PSD) in Kathmandu, Nepal. PSD is a non-governmental, social development organization seeking to better support to the poorest communities and the most vulnerable people

in Nepal. Bishnu has his Masters Degree in Business Administration, and is a former employee of the American Peace Corps, Save The Children Foundation in the United Kingdom, and Student Partnership Worldwide. In his present position, he leads consultancy and training activities. He has participated in over 20 national and international conferences and is a member of various working groups on the international level.